

ADDRESS

BY

HIS HONOUR THOS. HUGHES, Q.C.,

ON THE OCCASION OF THE PRESENTATION OF A TESTIMONIAL
IN RECOGNITION OF HIS SERVICES TO THE CAUSE
OF CO-OPERATION,

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ON occasions like this there must always, I should think, be a conflict in the mind of the person who stands in the position I occupy to-day. At anyrate, I can speak for myself, that there is such a conflict in my mind. For when a man finds his name linked with a great cause, of which, for the moment, he is treated as the representative, he must be a strangely arrogant or vain specimen of his race if some sense of shame does not mingle with the pleasure and pride of the moment. So, at least, it is with me to-day. Delegates from every part of the United Kingdom, representing each in his own neighbourhood this social movement which has in great measure already revolutionised the industrial life of England, and is destined to do so from top to bottom, have gathered here, with you, my lord, as chairman, to present me with this testimonial, as one to whom their thanks are due as an old leader in their noble work. And so the position brings forcibly home to me the words of Coleridge's famous sonnet—

“ It seems like stories from the land of spirits,
If any man attain that which he merits,
If any merits that which he attains.”

For when I look round this room I see old friends who were before me in the work, and have made far greater sacrifices of time and means to its promotion. I became a co-operator in 1849, and on my first visit to these parts, as a co-operator, found Abraham Greenwood already a leading member of the Rochdale Pioneers, who had started seven years before; Lloyd Jones brought his enthusiasm and already large experience to the first meeting of the promoters of working men's associations in London; our General Secretary joined the infant society at once, and has devoted a fortune and talents which might have earned him wealth and distinction in any profession to the cause to which I have been able to give only the odds and ends of the time and savings of a busy life. I see, too, many a younger man whose record, though shorter in years, would, if fairly valued, well entitle him to change places with me on this platform. These, however, are still working in the ranks from which I have had to retire. Long may they remain in active service, to guide your counsels and to inspire your efforts.

You will, then, I am sure, give me credit for a genuine sense of unworthiness in my thankful acceptance of your gifts. The form they have taken is peculiarly grateful to me. You have founded a scholarship, in my name, at the Oxford College with which my family has been connected for three generations. Our first scholar—the son, I am glad to say, of a working member of one of our own societies—is to begin his residence next Michaelmas at Oriel. That college has a noble

record of great names on its rolls, and from it have gone forth influences which have deeply affected English life in the past. I venture to think that the grand old foundation of Edward II. will suffer no shame in the future by having cordially welcomed the first scholar from the ranks of labour, while to me, personally, it is a proud thought that my old college must always remain so intimately connected with this movement. For our chairman to-day (though you may not know it) is an Oriel man, and was the first bishop who recognised the meaning of our work, and came forward to wish it and us God's speed. Our general secretary, also an Oriel man, has, as you all know, been doing work for us for many years, which I say confidently no single man—I believe no three other men—could have done so well. I think our Central Board will almost have reason enough to add the grace-cup toast, “*Floreat Oriel per saecula saeculorum*,” to those usually given at our yearly Congress.

And now, I think I shall not be travelling out of the record if I ask you once again to consider what we are all bound together for? What we really mean by this movement? Or, perhaps, I shall clear the ground better by asking first what we *don't* mean by it. Some twenty years ago (I forget the exact date), when one of our Bills for extending our Magna Charta, “The Industrial Societies Act,” was before the House of Commons, a deputation, of which I was a member, had to see Mr. R. Lowe, as he then was, about it. I think he was Secretary to the Treasury at the time. He was unusually affable; asked us a few questions as to our methods—not so well known then as they have since become—promised the support of the Government, adding, casually, “that this kind of co-operation secured an excellent plan for getting tea and shirts cheap.” The zeal of one of our younger members was fired by this definition of our objects, and he proceeded to expound to Mr. Lowe that his views were entirely inadequate. The great man listened much more patiently than I expected, and then said, “Well, it doesn't matter here. But don't talk like that in the lobby presently if you want to get your Bill through the House.” Now, my own belief is that, even to this day, nine-tenths of the nation outside our own ranks are still of Mr. Lowe's opinion. And to a great extent they are justified, at anyrate if they belong to the upper or middle classes. For in the huge supply societies which have sprung up in London and elsewhere they see that cheapness is really the one end and aim. A good thing, too, it is in its way, and kept in its proper place; but if this were indeed all we aim at, should we be meeting here to-day? For my part I distrust cheap tea, and like to give a good price for my shirts. Do you think Mr. Neale would have worked like a slave at our legal and secretarial business, or that our chairman would have preached to us and spoken at our meetings, to save 6d. a pound on their tea, or 2d. a yard on their calicoes? There is not a man in this room—I had almost said in the whole movement—who does not feel the utter inadequacy of this view. Whatever our ultimate aim may be, it is not cheap goods, so I will turn at once to the positive side of the problem, and show, in as few words as I can, what I, at anyrate, have always understood our aim to be.

To do this I must go back nearly forty years. I was then a youth fresh from Oxford, where I had attended much more to cricket, and rowing, and boxing than to the lectures on Ethics and Politics of our chairman, excellent as these were. I had lived all my life in a Berkshire village, where my mother and the parson's wife knew every poor person in the parish, and there was absolutely no distress. You may imagine, then, the effect upon me of a sudden plunge into what was then one of the worst quarters of London. My rooms were in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and I passed daily, twice at least, through the horrible nests of squalor and vice which then stood on the site of the New Law Courts. I soon found that (with the exception of thieves and beggars) these nests were peopled by slop workers—poor men, women, and children, who, if their employers could only have flogged them, would have been in a far worse case than any negro slave. I saw that the competitive struggle for life had brought them to this pass ; and yet the most approved teachers, in reviews and newspapers, which I had begun to read, and even in Parliament, were insisting on "free competition" as a corollary to "free trade," and a necessary pillar of industrial prosperity. The natural consequence was that I had all but become a physical-force Chartist, when the late Mr. Maurice became chaplain of Lincoln's Inn. He at once gathered a number of young students round him for the discussion of social questions, and work amongst the poor, and within a year I had thrown over Chartism as a delusion, had become a Christian Socialist, and was hard at work establishing associations amongst the London slop-workers. I have never swerved from that day to this, and am, if possible, to-day a more convinced Christian Socialist than I was in 1849. And you all know well, for I have always proclaimed it, that it is as a Christian Socialist that I have worked cordially in your ranks ever since, through bad and good times.

You call yourselves co-operators, and I prefer the other name ; but I am careless about names so long as we mean the same thing, and the same thing we have always hitherto professed to mean in our union. You may not, some of you at least, accept the form of my belief, that co-operation is "the application of the principles of Christianity to trade and industry," and above all of that central principle—"Bear ye one another's burthen." But you have laid it down as the basis of your union that men are meant to be fellow-workers, not rivals, and that justice, and not the higgling of the market, must regulate exchange ; so that you have only put the Christian Socialist formula into different words, meaning the same thing. I know, of course that there are those in our ranks who have always objected to attempts, as they phrase it, to make co-operation a religious movement, and such objections have been prominent of late in our paper the *Co-operative News*. I hope it is not out of place for a word of remonstrance with these aggrieved brethren on this occasion : and what I would say to them is this :—You agree that "fellowship," "brotherhood," "bearing each other's burthens," is the foundation stone of our union. Well, we don't object to your putting it, "bear ye one another's burthens, and so fulfil the law of secularism, agnosticism, positivism," if it be the law of those faiths. Then why should you on your part

object to my putting it, “ bear ye one another’s burthens, and so fulfil the law of Christ,” when I am absolutely certain that it *is* the law of my Master ? I see, too, a slight tendency of late in other quarters to object to the prominence of the National Church at late Congresses, and I would ask, is this reasonable ? It is true that we have had now three bishops preaching or presiding for us, and that at the Congress a special service has always been held for us in the parish church. But there is also always service and a sermon at some Nonconformist Chapel. Probably the fact that the bishops and clergy are the servants of us all, whether Churchmen or Nonconformists, has led us to them in the first instance. We, as English folk, have a right to their services, whereas we are asking a favour of Nonconformist ministers, who are only the servants of their own denomination of Christians. But how paltry all such small differences seem in front of the great battle we are all fighting. I say all, for although I have ceased to be actively engaged, I hope to remain in the reserve, and to do what I may for the good cause to the day of my death.

I only wish I could impress on all here who are not as convinced as I am of the tremendous import for England of that battle. She is still at the head of the nations in commercial and manufacturing industry. How long do you think she will remain so if commerce and industry continue in the old grooves ? To me, at least, it seems clearer than ever before, that the critical time—the parting of the ways finally—has come. Often before within living memory there have been times of depression and stagnation in trade, but never anything like that of the present time. One universal cry of distress is going up from every great trade and industry in the land. And what is the cry ? Surely, my friends, the strangest that ever went up from any great trading community till now. “ Too much corn,” “ too much sugar,” too much cotton,” “ too much labour,” too much in short of every species of wealth, and yet our merchants and manufacturers are being ruined, while two-thirds, at least, of our people are underfed, badly clothed, miserably housed. Does anyone believe this can last ? Power is passing rapidly into the hands of those who are underfed, badly clothed, miserably housed. How long, with all their patience, will they respect these huge and unused accumulations of all that they and their children need ? How, then, has this come about, and what is the remedy ? I answer, as a Christian Socialist, “ because this nation has forgotten who is the Lord of trade, and so has not obeyed the laws He has laid down for its conduct.”

“ Our fathers would not know Thy ways
And Thou has left them to their own.”

And what have their own ways been ? A feverish, eager struggle by every man for himself. Free competition proclaimed as the sole adjuster of supply and demand—the semi-sacred law of trade—and so every man’s hand has been against his neighbour, until the keenest and least scrupulous, instead of the wisest and most upright, men have come to the front, and got the control of almost every branch of industry and trade. I do not say that the time has actually come when an honest and scrupulous man cannot live by trade, but it is

not far off. The coach will be over the precipice before we know it, unless the horses can be turned into the right road.

How, then, are they to be turned? My friends, is there a man in this room to whose lips the answer does not spring at once? We are bound together from John o' Groats to the Land's End, in a union which already includes at least one in fifteen of the working men of Great Britain to give that answer, and let us see to it that it is given in no faint-hearted or hesitating tone. The words are familiar enough to us, "men are to be fellow-workers and not rivals," "justice must rule trade." These are the maxims of our union, and include all that is needed to set things right. Thirty, twenty years ago they might be called "counsels of perfection." They can be called so no longer. We all know what they have done for us—that just so far as we have been true to them our cause has prospered. "Concert," if we must have a single watchword, "concert" is that word, to be set foot to foot against "competition" in every department of human life, never to yield an inch, but to stand as for the dear life till the battle is won. It is vain to say you have only proved it in the easiest branch of industry. All things must have a beginning, and what has been done in this generation in distribution will be done in production in the next.

Besides, if *we* have not proved it, yet it has been proved elsewhere. In France, splendid examples have already been set by the Leclairs and Godins; and what Frenchmen have done I have yet to learn that Englishmen cannot do. But have we not proved it, too; and that within the last few weeks, in the very highest department of human industry—the Government of the nation? For the whole year since Parliament met we have been provoked and humiliated by the bitter and frivolous strife among our governing men over a measure of justice upon which they were really all in agreement. At last, when the confusion and rancour had risen to what seemed a hopeless point, when the law of free competition had all but done its baleful work, the leaders turned to "concert," and in a few days the whole difficulty and deadlock melts away like a bad dream. Who will venture to say that what is good enough for guiding a nation is not good enough for working a factory?

So, I say, my friends, that if England is to be saved, the spirit of strife, and division, and hatred (of the devil, if you prefer to put it so) must be driven out, and will be driven out of every stronghold. But I don't say that it won't be a tough job, which will try us all to the very uttermost. I don't say that the strongest of them all—the trade citadel—will ever be carried, except by men of strong enthusiasm and strong faith. Take my word for it, brother co-operators, or rather, don't take my word, but take the word of all history, that no great cause was ever triumphant without these two—faith and enthusiasm. Have we, then, got them in our ranks to-day? Are we still men who believe in concert and brotherhood with all our hearts, and will go for them with all our might? If not, we may just as well fall out of the ranks. We are not the men to carry the flag over those frowning ramparts. We shall only bewilder our comrades, and throw the advance into confusion by remaining.

When I ask myself this question, I am often sorely inclined to be cast down. With the trumpet-tone of the advance of 1849-50 still sounding in my ears, I seem to listen in vain for the true ring in these later days. I have seen old comrades disappearing, and often their places filled by those in whom the electric spark had never been kindled, who neither believed, nor loved, nor hated as they must believe, and love, and hate, who would win this battle. But then some article in our paper, some trait of devotion and self-sacrifice in our associations, has flashed out again and again to prove that, in spite of appearances, there are men enough left who have never bowed, and never will bow the knee to Baal: and I would only implore these not to keep back their testimony in this solemn crisis in the labour movement. The people are gathered together in silence, almost in despair, not knowing what ails them, or where to turn for aid or strength. Theirs should be the voice to startle them. "How long halt ye between two opinions?" If "competition" and "self-assertion" be the law, follow that; but if "concert," and "the sacrifice of selfish desires" be the law, then follow that. Believe me there is no halting place between the two—one or the other you may be faithful to, to both ye cannot be faithful. "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon."

Pardon me, my friends, if I have used words and allusions which some of you may deem profaned by such use, but which those who know me best will know are the most natural to me, and the only ones which could adequately express my feelings to-day. For I cannot put in other than the most solemn words I know my own deep conviction of the seriousness of the crisis which is upon us, and upon all nations; and of the only vessel in which we shall be able to ride out the storm. For other nations there may be other lifeboats. State Socialism, the most specious of these, seems to be making astonishing advances on the Continent, and may, for aught I know, be suited to the habits and needs of other nations. Ours it will never suit, as was proved, I think, by Robert Owen and his friends. Here it runs counter to all our best traditions and most valuable habits. "Stand aside, and only give us light, and air, and a fair chance, and we will do well for ourselves, and for each other, and for the whole country." This is the gospel all our best co-operators have preached since the present movement began, and it is the one which I trust you will all continue to preach in the new year, and in all years to come, with ever-growing success.

And now I must wish you "God speed," though there is much I might still desire to say did the time serve. I accept this noble gift of yours as the sign—the cross set up at the end of the day's journey—to mark that my active work amongst you is a thing of the past. Well; it has been the work which I have felt through all the years of my manhood to be by far the noblest and most pressing to which a man could put his hand, in our land, in our day. Would that I could have served the great cause better! May you prosper ever more and more in carrying on the flag!